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With the Compliments of
the Author

Benjamin Franklin

By

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Sixty-two years ago in the chief city of this state, before the Mercantile Library company, the Reverend William Ellery Channing spoke on the "Present Age." He described it as an age stirring, pregnant, eventful. He said: "It is an age never to be forgotten. Its voice of warning and encouragement is never to die. Its impression on history is indelible. Amidst its events the American Revolution, the first distinct, solemn assertion of the rights of men, and the French Revolution, that volcanic force which shook the earth to its centre, are never to pass from men's minds. Over this age the night will, indeed, gather, more and more as time rolls away; but in that night two forms will appear, Napoleon and Washington, the one a lurid meteor, the other a benign, serene and undecaying star. Another name will live in history, your Franklin; and the kite which brought lightning from Heaven will be seen sailing in the clouds by remote posterity when the city where he dwelt may be known only by its ruins."

The history of this extraordinary man is the story of a struggle, the record of a life that began in lowly surroundings and ended in splendor. It contains, therefore, the substance of the tales that have chiefly interested the world. His life is universally known, for his autobiography is the most popular work of that class in the English language.

Everyone knows his journey from Boston to Philadelphia, how he was nearly drowned in New York bay, how he walked from Perth Amboy to Burlington, 50 miles through ever-during rain; how he took boat at Burlington upon an October afternoon and landed at the foot of Market street in Philadelphia the following Sunday morning; how he walked the quiet streets, a ridiculous figure munching a roll, and how he found shelter that first night in the strange city at the Crooked Billet in Water street. The strange mutations of life! This vagrant, adventurous lad, ragged, travel stained, awkward, with shirts and stockings in his pockets and a Dutch dollar his whole stock of cash, this humble soap-boiler's son was to become the

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most conspicuous and admired figure of two continents, to stand before kings, to converse with scholars and to receive every honor that the most venerable academies of learning could bestow.

“Seest thou a man diligent in his calling, he shall stand before kings, he shall not stand before mean men.” “This proverb,” said Franklin, “my father was fond of quoting to me. I did not think that I should ever literally stand before kings, which honor has since happened; for I have stood before five and even had the honor of sitting down with one, the king of Denmark, to dinner.” It was as the wily and strategic politician who had lived to clutch the golden keys, and mould a mighty state’s decrees, and shape the whisper of the throne, that he met on terms of perfect intellectual equality with Burke and Chatham. It was as the philosophical thinker and writer that he sat at dinner with the “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” and was embraced by Voltaire in the hall of the Academy while enthusiastic sages and tribunes thundered their applause: “Behold Solon and Sophocles embrace!”

Never was there a man more idolized. Everything about him was copied and extolled; his spectacles, his fur cap, his brown coat, his bamboo cane. Men wore their coats and hats and carried their snuff boxes *a la Franklin*, women crowned him with flowers, and every patrician house showed a Franklin portrait on the wall, and a Franklin stove in one of the apartments.

Franklin's mind drained a large surface. He was one of the most versatile of men. He left not one of his many talents uncultivated; and while the aristocratic world and the arena of statecraft shouted his praise, the serener sphere of scholarship and science extended to him its amplest recognition. He who had never been to college received the honorary degree of doctor of laws from St. Andrews, Edinburgh, and Oxford, and the honorary master of arts from Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary.

He was elected unanimously a fellow of the Royal Society, an honor voluntarily conferred and all fees remitted, and from that venerable society he received the Copley gold medal. In France he became a member of the Encyclo-

pædists and the Society of the Economists. In Germany he was received with respectful honor at Hanover and Göttingen.

Franklin's mind was naturally receptive and he was restlessly curious about all natural phenomena. Doubtless the scientific bias of Pennsylvania developed in him the instinct or predilection for natural philosophy. In Pennsylvania he became familiar with the work of David Rittenhouse, Humphrey Marshall, John Bartram and Gothilf Muhlenberg. While his investigations in electricity were his chief contributions to scientific knowledge, I cannot forbear from reminding you how he studied the gulf stream and, with the true enthusiasm of the scientific investigator, even while suffering the torments of sea sickness, took careful and frequent note of the changing temperature of the water.

In company with the chemist Brownrigg of Cumberland he put forth into the midst of Derwentwater, when its waves were beaten to fury and to foam by a tempestuous mountain wind, and successfully tried the experiment of

calming the lake by pouring oil upon the water. Aristotle and Plutarch and Pliny had said that it could be done. Franklin was the first among experimental philosophers to demonstrate that a few drops of oil would tranquillize turbulent waters. So interested was he in his experiment that he was wont to carry a few drops of oil in the upper-hollow joint of his bamboo cane to watch the effect upon wind-beaten pools.

Is it too fanciful to take this scientific experiment as an illustration of Franklin's career and character? He seems to me to have gone through life pouring oil on troubled waters. He was an emollient softening the asperities and crudities of contention. His writings were always conciliatory, irenic. He refrained from disputation, and tried by every means in his power to splinter the broken joint between the colonies and Old England. From the first he was loyal to the English government. He assured Lord Chatham that "having more than once travelled almost from one end of the continent to the other and kept a great variety of company, eating, drinking and conversing freely with

them, I never had heard in any conversation from any person, drunk or sober, the least expression of a wish for a separation, or hint that such a thing would be advantageous to America.”

The British empire with homely comparison he likened to a handsome china vase, 'twere a great pity to break it; and he was convinced that the dismemberment of the empire would mean ruin to all its parts. When it was urged that in time the colonies by their growth would become the dominant half he answered, “Which is best, to have a total separation, or a change of the seat of government?” Here he seems to have caught for a moment a glimpse of an historic vision of which Lord Rosebery in dream has recently seen the phantom retrospect. Is it fanciful, asks that eloquent statesman to dwell for a moment on what might have happened if the elder Pitt had not left the House of Commons when he became first minister?

“He would have prevented or suppressed the reckless budget of Charles Townshend, have induced George III to listen to reason, introduced representatives from America into the

Imperial Parliament, and preserved the thirteen American colonies to the British crown.

The reform bill would probably have been passed much earlier, for the new blood of America would have burst the old vessels of the constitution. And when, at last, the Americans became the majority the seat of empire would perhaps have been moved solemnly across the Atlantic, and Britain have become the historical shrine and European outpost of the world empire. What an extraordinary revolution it would have been had it been accomplished. The most sublime transference of power in the history of mankind. The greatest sovereign in the greatest fleet in the universe; ministers, government, Parliament, departing solemnly for the other hemisphere; not as in the case of the Portuguese sovereigns emigrating to Brazil under the spur of necessity, but under the vigorous embrace of the younger world."

Well, some such vision seems to have wavered for a moment before the unimaginative brain of Franklin as he reflected upon these things. But after years of labor he could only say, "I do

not find that I have gained any point in either country, except that of rendering myself suspected by my impartiality; in England of being too much an American, and in America of being too much an Englishman."

He found himself entirely in accord with Burke and Chatham with regard to the unity and integrity of the empire, and with regard to the unjust taxation of America. He said, "I can only judge of others by myself. I have some little property in America. I will freely spend nineteen shillings in the pound to defend the right of giving or refusing the other shilling; and, after all, if I cannot defend that right, I can retire cheerfully with my little family into the boundless woods of America which are sure to afford freedom and subsistence to any man who can bait a hook or pull a trigger."

It was the famous affair of the Hutchinson Letters which made the maintenance of this mediatorial position impossible to him. It is a commonplace of American history. Certain letters written by Thomas Hutchinson, royal governor of Massachusetts, to friends in England,

in which he recommended the sending of troops and men of war, and advising that in the colonies "there must be an abridgment of what are called English liberties," fell into the hands of Franklin. How Franklin became possessed of the letters remains still a mystery. The source was undivulged by him. He transmitted them to America. Massachusetts Bay petitioned the government to remove from office the writer of the letters. In the fierce quarrel that ensued one man was wounded in a duel, and the solicitor general, Alexander Wedderburn, afterwards the earl of Roslyn, assailed Franklin before the privy council with furious invective. It was a scene, as Lecky has said, well suited to the brush of an historical painter. For more than an hour Franklin stood, tranquilly, silently, before his malignant foe, his coolness and apathy in striking contrast with the violence and clamour of the Scotch declaimer, while grave men clapped their hands in boundless amused delight at the baiting of the American. "He has forfeited," cried Wedderburn, "all the respect of societies and of men. Men will watch

him with a jealous eye; they will hide their papers from him and lock up their escritaires. He will henceforth esteem it a libel to be called a man of letters, a man of three letters—*homo-trium literarum, fur, a thief.*” However we may poise the cause in justice’s equal scales, it is chiefly interesting to us as the critical event which converted Franklin into a stubborn opponent of the English government, and changed the American sentiment toward him into enthusiasm and affection. It was the only cherished hatred of his life, and how deep the poisoned shaft had sunk into his soul we may infer from the well authenticated story that four years later when the treaty of alliance with France was signed, Franklin dressed himself for that day’s historic achievement in the same Manchester cloak of velvet which he last wore when he stood under the pitiless storm of Wedderburn’s vituperation. Considered in the perspective of history I find Franklin distinguished by his versatility. He was the first American to transcend provincial, colonial boundaries and limitations. As postmaster he went abroad over the

country and took the wind of all its moods. He was the first man of science and the first man of letters to achieve a wide and permanent reputation in Europe; and three of his writings, his "Autobiography," "Poor Richard" and "Father Abraham's Speech" are abiding monuments of American literature. As a diplomatist his signature is appended to the treaty of alliance, the treaty of peace, the Declaration of Independence and the constitution. He is the only man who signed all four of those state papers.

Most great men are like Labrador spar, as you turn it in your hand it remains dull and lustreless until you strike a particular angle, when it shows rich and brilliant hues. Franklin, while unendowed with imagination or inspiration, displayed astonishingly various capacity. He had clear vision, original observation and abundant worldly wisdom, yet withal a low aim and was content with earth, its fruits and prizes. What is Good is with him what is good to eat and to wear. He shows a certain Philistine content with prosperous living. His ideal was a life of thrift, caution, husbandry, comfort and rational enjoy-

ment. He knew no sad torment of the thoughts that lie beyond the reaches of our souls, he was undisturbed by the burden of the mystery of the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world.

While the New Englanders were contemplating with awe the dread mysteries of Eternity he was minding his shop and his small concerns of earth. A frank acceptance of the material world and a desire to do some practical good in the world—these things are the life of Franklin. And so he founded benevolent and useful institutions—hospitals, libraries, schools and learned societies, invented stoves and lightning rods and labor saving devices, lighted and paved streets, and protected towns from fire. Such utilitarian subjects occupied him. He did not squander his thought in desperate ventures of new found and foggy metaphysics.

One great factor in his success and a secret of his far-extended fame was his complete command of clear and correct English. Addison, Bunyan and Defoe were his masters and his models in the difficult art of expression. He

never attained the grace and delicacy of Addison, or the imaginative fervor of Bunyan, and his style is most nearly allied to the pedestrian prose of Defoe, who was the first great English journalist and writer of reportorial narrative. Franklin's English is no intertissued robe of gold and pearl, no taffeta phrases and silken terms precise, but honest, homely, hearty speech, without obscurity or ambiguity, an English that speaks in russet yeas and honest Kersey noes.

He lived a happy life, or perhaps I should say a cheerful life. He made all of himself that he could. He had abundant recognition, was well spoken of, even with reverence at a time when party feeling was filled with rancor. His cheer and confidence became the encouragement of America and the inspiration of France. When dark tidings of disaster came from America the Frenchmen who sought "Father Franklin" to condole with him, found the patriarch philosophically calm and confident. To all such reports he replied, *ça ira, ça ira*—it will go on. And when dark days came upon France, in the awful storm of the revolution, and men de-

spaired of everything, they remembered the serenity of the great American, and they repeated to each other until the repetition became a watchword of hope and courage and endurance—"Ça ira, ça ira." Yes, his life was cheerful, his accomplishments prodigious, his consummation quiet and his grave renowned.

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